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Time Out For Smiles

Carter and Co. Jest With the Media

By Nancy Collins

"Why am I here?" asked presidential aide Hamilton Jordan last night as he gazed around the grand ballroom of the Washington Hilton, which was packed with press for the annual Radio and Television Correspondents Association Dinner.

"Why, I'm here because I love the press. See," said Jordan, "I even got all dressed up. I wore a tuxedo, and I've still got my tie on. Clearly, this one night is going to change my entire image."

No one, of course, was anticipating miracles on that score, but it was clearly Jordan's night in terms of verbal jabs from nearly everyone including his boss, Jimmy Carter, and political satirist Mark Russell.

"There's no crisis in this administration," said Russell in an after-dinner presentation preceding the president's remarks. "Otherwise, why would Hamilton Jordan have been asked to speak at the annual Norman Mailer symposium on the social graces?"

Meanwhile, Carter began his own remarks by thanking the media assemblage. "During the last 14 months, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Stan Turner, Griffin Bell, Hamilton Jordan, Bert Lance and I would like to express our deep appreciation for a done for us."

On hand last night were CBS Walter Cronkite and Roger Mudd; NBC News president Les Crystal; Sen. Gary Hart (D-Colo.) and the president's pollster, Pat Caddell.

The president, who slipped in quietly just as waiters were serving dessert, surprised most of the guests. "God, what I wouldn't give for a good blast of 'Hail to the Chief' once in a while," said one network correspondent nostalgically when the fanfare was skipped.

Seating himself at the head table Carter smiled as he listened to Russell and watched a skit by the The-Not-Yet-Ready-for-Prime-Time White House Players, who included ABC newscaster Sam Donaldson, CBS' Bob Schieffer, NBC's Judy Woodruff, AP Radio's Walter Rodgers and what the program called an "unreliable source" in the form of White House Press Secretary Jody Powell.

Among the rapid-fire one-liners, Russell told the audience of a rumor that the new NBC president, Fred Silverman, would be "changing the name of the 'Nightly News' to 'Laverne and Brinkley,'" and that television in-depth coverage meant a "30-second examination of the energy package followed by a 60-second commercial for Poli-Grip."

With tongue in cheek, Carter lauded his own staff, including Powell: "We have been in trouble a couple of times with the press," said the president, "and I don't accept any responsibility for it."

He then added that "during Mark Russell's presentation I noticed how strange the audience looked. The last few months it's been difficult for me to recognize a reporter with a smile on his face."

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